

COLLABORATION, EDITING, TRANSPARENCY

Challenges and possibilities of a “wikification” of journalism¹

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SBPJor / Sociedade
Brasileira de Pesquisa
em Jornalismo

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the possibilities and challenges of the incorporation of wikis in journalistic editorial offices, especially in the processes involving the drafting and editing of texts. The reflection takes into consideration a context marked by 1) continuous fragmented publication of information; 2) simplification and horizontal organization of journalistic routines, which directly impacts the figure of the editor (mainly in the media on the web); and 3) increasing public participation in the development of the news, with the mediation of professionals. “Wiki-journalism” practices on the Wikinews and Wikipedia sites and initiatives originating with print publications are presented and discussed, and based on them we distinguish two models, which differ in the degree of control of the process by the journalists.

Key-words: wiki-journalism, Wikipedia, editing, collaborative journalism.

INTRODUCTION

Fragmentation of the reports and plurality of voices are two outstanding characteristics nowadays of the dynamics of production and publication of information, including that of a journalistic nature. The consolidated model in the mass communication era, based on the restriction of news production and dissemination to a few media and professionals, responsible for the development of “finished” products (newspapers, magazines, etc.), has a increasingly closer relationship with and is more decisively influenced by a scattered, uninterrupted flow of information produced for, in and without the knowledge of the journalistic editorial offices.

In this context, media and professionals in the area tend to seek means to bring closer to, or even integrate new resources and actors into the practices and routines of the journalistic field. These practices and routines, in turn, have undergone during the last decade constant transformations. Impacted by computerization and by journalist staff

reductions (interlinked phenomena, but not necessarily cause and result), the journalistic editorial offices today have less hierarchical internal processes. The possibility of publication of news “in real time” on the Internet has accelerated a trend toward “self-publication” of content by the reporter, marked by errors which could be avoided by a proofreader or editor and by the hurried release of stories which minutes later will be replaced by others and others, generating an excessive fragmentation of the journalistic discourse.

In this context of “deregulation” of the production and publication of various contents, we present a tool which, based on the practices associated with it, stands out due to its capability for integration of the information produced and incorporation, mediated or not, of new subjects in the preparation of journalistic texts: the wikis. More known for being the platform of Wikipedia, one of the most popular sites nowadays, the wiki tool has been utilized somewhat frequently as a support for the production and aggregation of journalistic content, including by large media groups, in a practice generically called “wiki-journalism” (Bradshaw, 2007).

In this article we intend to discuss, based on a context of major changes in the profession’s production routines, the wiki tool’s challenges and potentialities for journalistic drafting and editing. The wikis’ specificities seem to us especially appropriate in the continuous effort to edit information coming from different sources and in the incorporation, mediated or not, of new actors in the news production processes. The practices of “wiki-journalism” on the Wikinews and Wikipedia sites and initiatives originating with print publications are presented and discussed, which will allow us to discuss very different uses of the same tool.

According to Wikipedia and Wikinews in Portuguese, wikification “is the act of formatting a page according to the wiki standard, that is, the internal links, the removal of HTML tags, the placement of interwikis, categories and similar items”. It deals therefore with a textual editing which seeks mainly to adapt the content to the tool’s specific aspects. A broader editing, which includes “the need for rewriting the text, putting it in order again and similar items” is called “recycling”² In the argumentation to be presented here, however, the idea of “wikification of journalism”, besides the adaptation of the texts to the wikis’ technical characteristics, also implies changes in the journalistic production routines and processes inside the editorial offices and in the relation of the latter with the lay public, seeking, in the last instance, the publication

of better finished and more relevant contents.

The possibility of our associating journalistic routines with a tool based on continuous, open updating of information approaches what Kosik (2008) called “wikification of knowledge”. The author (a neuroscientist) emphasizes the existence of two currently coexisting forms of knowledge – the specialist, based on the concept of authority, and wiki knowledge, based on collective experiences. Taking into consideration the challenges of the medicine and journalism areas, he stresses the need for professionals in these areas to consider the risks and benefits of sharing with laymen the management of information which determines the result of their work. In this sense, we believe that wikis, more than tools with given technical characteristics, synthesize challenges and possibilities increasingly more evident for journalism, as we will explain in detail below.

Simplification of the processes, fragmentation of the texts

“Why doesn’t every news site have a wiki, updated constantly with the new facts and views that are gathered in the field and vetted in a reporting/bloggging/commenting process?”
Langeveld (2009)

With some variations – and running the risk of generalizing – we can say that there is (or was) a journalistic text production “model” adopted in the editorial offices throughout the last decades. Professionals who, to a lesser or greater degree, interfere in the material to be published, traditionally revolve around the reporter, the central figure in the entire routine involving preparation of the journalistic story. The layout men, proofreaders, copy editors, checkers and especially the editors are intermediaries who influence the drafting, although on the credit line of the stories, only the reporter signs and is responsible for the final result.

In Brazil, there occurred in the 1950s the implementation of a model which sought, in the last instance, to adopt journalistic activity to a more rigid, almost industrial, production routine, always searching for more efficiency and “quality” in the final product. Starting with this decade the country witnessed the adoption of the first drafting manuals, of the lead as a “formula” for drafting the text and of professionals with specific functions, such as the copy editor.

According to Lustosa (1996), the copy editor was an innovation brought from the USA, where the existence of reporters whose “mastery of the English language was terrible” must have been frequent, requiring

the division of tasks between two groups of journalists: one who obtained the information and “another who recast the narration of the events, transforming it into news”. The origin of this activity is also linked to the increase in the flow of information written in the editorial office based on technological increments, such as the adaptation of “texts received by telex” as Medeiros (2002, p. 27) mentions.

The computerization of the journalistic editorial offices, initiated back in the 1980s, brought progressive impacts on the production routine of the stories, in general simplifying technical operations and reducing the number of professionals involved. Regarding this epoch, Soster (2006, p. 36) mentions that “roles which were until then usual in the editorial offices’ hierarchies, as was the case of the proofreader and the assistant editor, were gradually eliminated, or made more fragile in their importance, increasing the reporters’ responsibility for the final result of the stories”. In a recent survey, Stepp (2009) identified that the cuts in the editorial offices of American media affected more the position of editor than that of the reporters.

The connection of the editorial office computers in internal and external (Internet) networks and journalistic production involving sites and portals were the next steps in this process and culminated in even more radical alterations in the routines. In an increasingly intense way, the reporters or editors of the news sites enjoy great autonomy to alone perform the “whole” cycle which involves journalism, “without any apparent filter or editors who perform the role of proofreading or editing” (Martinez, 2007, p. 16).

Among the recent changes identified in the journalistic routines, therefore, there stands out a reordering of the hierarchies inside the editorial offices marked by a growing “horizontal organization” of the relations, mainly between reporters and editors. In the adaptation process, Stepp (2009) identified new forms of editing adopted in the editorial offices, such as editing by a close colleague, editing after publication of a news item or sending material to an editor for checking and publication by means of a system which makes possible pre-visualization. As Soster (2006, p. 36) declares, today “the boundaries between who writes and who edits are hardly perceptible, diluting the figure of the editor”.

Studies of the production routine of Brazilian news portals confirm this scenario: Pereira (2004), on charting the operation of CorreioWeb, identified that the work of the “seated journalist” – the term coined by Erik Neveu to designate a professional more given to the handling of texts than to the gathering of information – “is alone and independent.

There is practically no external interference by editors or by management in the journalist's production" (p. 3). Jorge (2007), after an ethnographic study in the editorial office of the UOL portal, observed that "the journalist is his own reporting chief, but presents at the same time the duties of editor, layout man, reporter, drafter, pager, photographer (or "handler of photos"), producer" (p.189). A similar situation was identified by Barbosa (2003), who studied the UAI regional portals (linked to the *Diários Associados* group in the city of Belo Horizonte) and IBAHIA (of the Rede Bahia group in the city of Salvador). In the former, the "absence of an editor in the directing of the work" was noted, and this was a reason for complaint among the journalists; in IBAHIA, it was found that the "presence of the editor or coordinator is insufficient to generate an order and even uniformity with relation to the procedures for performance of the work" (p. 3).

Associated with the trend to "self-publication", the adaptation of journalistic production to the Internet was vigorously submitted to some characteristics of the latter, such as the possibility of instantaneous publication of an item of information and the breaking of the logic of periodical cycles in favor of a "continuous deadline". As Martinez (2007) states, "in less than five years of Internet operation, that idea of order and of production routine dictated by the industrial media (...) has been subverted by the frenetic rhythm of news in cyberspace".

One consequence of this process is the fragmentation of the journalistic content in various pages to the extent that new information about an event is developed or received by the editorial staff. In the logic of the instantaneity and the continuous flow of publications, the more finished texts have given way to sequences of journalistic notes often contradicting each other and without a sufficient contextual articulation for comprehension of the events by the final public.

For Martinez (2007), this problem is due to a rupture of the historical separation between the routines and the role of news agencies and of journalistic editorial offices. The former, which always had rapidity (based on the available technical means) and precision as their differentiating characteristics, were the "primary source for other media" and did not need to offer concluded information. It was traditionally up to the editors, in the editorial offices, to provide the articulation of the news fragments sent by the agencies, based on the time available and the profile of their media public. Hurried routines adopted by the news portals culminated in a decline in journalistic editing, which includes additional news gathering and research resulting from the journalistic

report sent by the agency. As Silva Junior (2008, p. 10) declares, “the limit of the newspapers’ operational velocity in synchronizing and reducing the time period from the events to the time of publication of the news stories is dependent upon the agencies’ velocity in passing on their services”.

One example of the fragmented publication of information about the same topic is the blog *Ao Vivo* (<http://colunas.g1.com.br/aovivo/>), maintained by G1, the news portal of *Organizações Globo*, which records there “the coverage of G1 in real time”. During the first four months of 2009, the content consisted of posts regarding the situation of the traffic in the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, as well as on the nearby highways, on the eve and final day of holiday weekends, when large traffic jams are frequently formed in the cities’ entrances and exits. On these occasions, the blog is highlighted on the portal’s home page and the site’s team begins to publish small posts about recent events – on April 17, 2009, the eve of the long *Tiradentes* holiday weekend, for example, 32 posts were published in an interval of almost five hours. The result is a fragmented coverage which makes it difficult to locate information about the traffic changes during the past few hours or the access to supplementary information relevant for drivers, such as the page which maintains updated the situation of the traffic on the main roads of São Paulo³.

Another variable which contributes decisively to the fragmentation of the journalistic discourse is the diversity of platforms for publication of content which are found on the web, whether they are “controlled” by journalists or not. To list only the “social media”, a matter can have sequential repercussions in blogs, microblogs, social network sites, etc., which operate in a system for circulation of more flexible news and in part are autonomous with relation to the “distribution systems” run by journalistic companies (Machado, 2006). These reports, in addition to expanding considerably the records of an event, are found scattered through the web, hindering the comprehension of the event or even the access to information by the public in general.

Langeveld (2009), reflecting on the current dynamics of production and circulation of information of journalistic interest, alerts us to the need for being attentive to what he calls “content cascade”. For the author, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to identify what the “journalistic event” is, or where the sequence of events which should be reported begins and ends. Like a “waterfall” with an uninterrupted flow of information, an editorial office should be prepared to produce

and edit information in a continuous way, exploiting the specificities of the available media and bringing together data published by different sources, including those maintained by the public. In this context, the author highlights the role which the wikis can assume in the organization of the flows of journalistic information, based on the possibility of continuous editing of information and, to some degree, of the opening for the participation of a wider public.

The routine of publishing news agency notes without a more finished editing of the content can be minimized if the texts are constantly updated, rewritten and divided into new items and pages interconnected by means of a wiki. In this context, the challenge is not just the gathering of unpublished information or the drafting of a single text regarding a subject, but mainly the editing of reliable information already made available by other sources of information, which can attribute a new degree of complexity to the journalistic production process.

Wiki-journalism and the opening to collaboration

For years, I myself spoke very badly about Wikipedia. But if something very important is happening in some part of the world, the Wikipedia page on that subject is the best coverage there is. There, people from all over are gathering together the best that comes out in the press everywhere. A work, it should be said, which is incredibly responsible, with care in mentioning the sources for each new data item. (Doria, 2009).

The possibility of the public's interference in the production and editing of news represents a significant impact in the routines adopted by the journalistic media and a change in the traditional role filled by the professional journalist. In the center of many current debates are the practices of the so-called "collaborative journalism", here understood as the co-participation of the public in one or more stages of the journalistic production network, such as the preparation of guidelines, news gathering, drafting, editing and/or establishing a hierarchy of the stories.

A central point in this discussion is the mediation to be utilized in the management of the tool by the journalistic media. From a more "conservative" perspective, no information could be published without the approval of a professional journalist. On the other hand, validation of an item of information could possibly be self-managed by an active community of lay users, with marginal or even non-existent participation by a professional. In the first case, the classic figure is maintained,

although in a more relative way, of the gatekeeper, a mediator responsible for the filtering of what would or would not be relevant for publishing as news in a publication. The opening of the processes to the participation of more people means, for the journalist, assuming the role of gatewatching (Bruns, 2005), an operation which is characterized by a selective filtering of the vast amount of information generated and published on the web, including by ordinary users.

The wikis are an exceptional and challenging technological platform for reflecting on the possibilities and challenges of “collaborative journalism”. Contrary to blogs and microblogs, in which each user publishes his information on a separate page and over which he has total autonomy, in the wikis the content is actually worked on by the collaborators jointly. The text under construction is unique and is the fruit of a consensus permanently negotiated by those involved, which reduces the importance of the mediation of the process by a professional and/or by the collaborators involved.

Some questions guide our discussion here: up to what point and how can the public’s participation in journalistic production, in this case by means of the wiki tool, make the routine of drafting and editing texts in the editorial offices more “efficient”? Which operations or production stages could more easily be shared with the public? And also: how can journalistic mediation be combined with an opening for the participation of the lay public?

On proposing a taxonomy for the practices of wiki-journalism, Bradshaw (2007) took into consideration criteria such as the possibility of the public proposing the topic to be developed collectively, the need for the text to be initiated by a professional or not, and the need for a final editing by a professional or not. The possibilities considered above roughly correspond to important stages of journalistic production (guidelines, drafting and editing, respectively) which, in the wiki environments, can be shared or even delegated to members outside the editorial office.

The author proposes five models of wiki-journalism experiences (p. 8). Two of them interest us directly in this article: the “open wikis”, in which the users have autonomy to place a topic on the agenda and develop it, as in Wikinews (and, in some cases, also in Wikipedia), and the “second draft wikis”, in which a text produced in the editorial office is rewritten by the readers. They are models which presuppose very different journalistic mediations, including in their final form: while the “open wikis” are potentially never closed, the “second drafts” in general

have a deadline to be met and are published, in “final” format, in print or even on web sites.

Wikipedia and Wikinews

Although it intends to be an encyclopedia, which presupposes a certain “distancing” from the events which it records for long-term consultation, Wikipedia has been permanently assuming, based on the rhythm of its updating, a journalistic nature (Coen, 2008). In this sense, it often approaches another project maintained by the Wikimedia Foundation, Wikinews, which intends to be the project which effectively involves news.

The two sites provide a model for production and editing of contents which is concentrated on the editing (or aggregation) of previously published information, and not on the direct gathering of new information. In addition to original news reports, Wikinews maintains news based exclusively on other sources and which have as its objective “bringing together all the available facts (...) for the reader’s convenience”, as explained in the Portuguese version of the project.

In Wikipedia, for example, at every major event (programmed or not) of journalistic interest, lots of collaborators remain connected to the site (or to Wikinews) in order to create and update in “real time” the pages of the “open encyclopedia”. Right after the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) and in London (2005) or the Tsunami catastrophe in Asia (2004), articles on the subject were rapidly inaugurated and intensely edited and interlinked with information relating to the events. In the Portuguese Wikipedia, although on much more modest scales than in the English version, similar phenomena can be identified in the coverage of events such as the plane crash at Congonhas Airport in São Paulo (d’Andréa, 2007) and on a smaller scale, the floods which hit the state of Santa Catarina in 2009, among various other cases.

The updating of the Wikipedia articles in the heat of events should adhere to the official policy of “No original research”⁴, which provides that all material added to the article under construction should have been published previously in a primary source of information considered reliable by the community of users. All the sources used should be mentioned throughout Wikipedia articles or Wikinews news items. Therefore, these journalistic texts do not provide (or at least should not provide) unpublished information about an event, but rather synthesize and add information published in other sources of information, and are exemplary cases of the use of Wikis as a support for editing journalistic information

available in fragmented form on pages on or off the reference site.

The possibility of editing, proofreading and/or checking after publication of an item of information is something especially dear to journalistic practice – even though, as we have discussed earlier, a routine which gives priority to precision is not always adopted in the editorial offices. Mainly in the case of Wikipedia, a supposed total deregulation of the text production process is significantly lightened not only by the engagement of the user community, but also by technical mechanisms and internal rules. The “watch” resource, for example, can be activated by any user interested in monitoring via e-mail the alterations made in a specific article, preventing an occasional error or an act of vandalism from remaining on the air for a long time.

The number and type of contributions made by the wikipedians were the basis for the rules which institutionalized four hierarchical levels within Wikipedia, creating a rigid organizational structure. A user registered for at least six months, author of “2,000 valid editing entries in the main domain” and “a reliable member of the community”, for example, can be elected Administrator, a wikipedian who has “*system operator (sysop) rights*”, that is to say, he has access to *Extra* technical resources with relation to the ordinary users. Protecting and leaving unprotected pages and blocking user IP addresses and accounts are some of the prerogatives of an administrator.

In this context, studies provide details of a complex operating dynamics and reveal results capable of surprising the most pessimistic observers. Träsel (2007), analyzing the evolution of seven Wikinews texts in English, concluded that “most collaborators seek to add important information to the initial texts regarding which they are active” (p. 19) and that the collaborators frequently accompany the development of the text in which they have intervened, which “suggests the existence of a feeling of responsibility for what is published” (p. 20). In this sense, after analyzing the complex mechanism for production and selection of the outstanding articles of Wikipedia in English, Viégas, Wattenberg & McKeon (2007, p. 445) concluded that “despite the apparent seeming for anarchy and chaos, a sophisticated set of processes have emerged”, which allows us to think that, when duly planned and monitored, some of the practices of “wiki-journalism” open to outside participation can be incorporated into the routines of the news sites.

Limited collaboration: the “second draft”

The “wikification” of journalistic practices can be also thought of

as specific stages in the production of news reports and articles, such as the proofreading of a text and/or checking of information by a community of users before or even after the publication of the material. Jacobs (2005), after preparing an article to be published by the men's magazine "*Esquire*", submitted the "original" version to the Wikipedia users' community, granting total freedom for modifying the text in style and content, mainly altering the intentionally mistaken information. In three days, the text was edited 576 times by 76 different wikipedians, resulting in material very different from the original. On evaluating the experience, the journalist showed surprise with the result, emphasizing that he should send all his articles to be "wikipedified" (Wikipedia). The initial version of the text and the edited version were published in the magazine. In Brazil, a similar experiment involved the dissemination of a "draft" prepared by journalist Pedro Costa among the volunteers of the national chapter of Wikimedia so that they could point out "incorrect items and adjustments (on the discussion page, preferably)". The final result was published in the newspaper *Gazeta Mercantil* the week following the collaborative editing (Wikimedia).

The opening of the raw material studied, including the entirety or excerpts from interviews with sources, for consultation and editing by the public are other ways of bringing the journalist's work closer to the public willing to collaborate. Singel (2006), for example, published a text with one thousand words in the wiki tool Social Text, authorizing the editing of the initial version. All told 348 editions of the text were recorded. Some of them reveal procedures for bringing closer together the work of the journalist and that of the collaborators: on making available a large part of the interview carried out with Ward Cunningham (creator of the wiki tool), the reporter allowed the users to choose another quotation from his conversation. A new source was suggested to the reporter who, not having the time to interview the source on the day of contact, suggested that the source add his contribution "in quotes" directly to the text. Another source was interviewed by a collaborator and his contribution was incorporated directly in the text, without previous interference by the reporter.

Another example is one of the models for news production provided by Wikinews: the publication of "original reporting" by "wiki-reporters". According to the guidelines of the project's English version, the preparation of any "original reporting" implies compliance with a series of journalistic procedures by "wiki-reporters", such as holding direct interviews with several sources and presentation of evidence of

all the information contained in the story by means of the discussion page linked to the article⁵. Should the “wiki-reporter” wish to maintain the sources of information off the record, the news gathering which originated the story can be presented in a private way to an administrator or an accredited wiki-reporter⁶.

For Bradshaw (2007, p. 2), this process adopted by Wikinews is based on a transparency rare in news sites of a commercial nature. In this sense, it can be said that transparency is something especially complex for journalism, whose “black box” of news production maintains the public very far from the routines followed in the editorial offices. The revelation of the means used for obtaining an item of information or of the choices made during the editing, for example, is not habitual with professionals or media. Martinez (2007, p. 18), on talking about journalism practiced on the Internet, believes that “letting the news process be transparent (...)” can help the reader “understand the production process of the journalistic message”, which results in more confidence and reciprocity.

The transparency of the routines for construction of the text is therefore one of the founding characteristics of wiki technology. By means of the History flap linked to each page, it is possible to recover any information added to the system, from the first to the last editing of the article, identifying, for example, when a modification was made and who made it, compare versions and undo an editing considered inappropriate. Another technical characteristic of wikis which makes it possible to give more transparency to the process is the recording of the discussions regarding a topic. For Thompson (2008), “nothing better reflects the dynamics of a dialogue in the editorial office relating to a complicated matter than the Wikipedia discussion page”.

Concluding the beginning of a discussion

Wikis are softwares with special technical characteristics capable of utilization for different purposes, such as information management in companies and collaborative learning in schools and other educational contexts. In journalism, we believe it is one of the tools which make it possible to bring the profession’s founding practices, such as professional mediation, closer to the present-day dynamics of publication and circulation of information.

Throughout this article we have sought to discuss the “wikification” of the journalistic production processes as one of the technical and conceptual possibilities to deal with the current technological, professional and social reality, marked, among other factors, by the simplification of

the routines and by the fragmentation of the publication of contents.

The possibilities of the lay public's participation, provided that a mediation policy is established, can mean an expansion of the number of collaborators engaged in journalistic production, giving new dynamics to an editing routine which today has become drained in the editorial offices. Obviously this does not mean that professionals could be simply replaced by the lay public. Singel (2006), reflecting on the experience of opening a text to the editing of collaborators, records that the result was not better than the work of a *Wired* editor. The final text, according to him, seemed more a manual of how the wikis operate rather than a journalistic story on the topic, which confirms the importance of a "mediator" who knows how to highlight details of a story and balance the diverse interests of the sources heard by the reporter.

The mere technological option for a wiki, it should be emphasized, is far from meaning a change in the routines of an editorial office. As Silva Junior (2008) states, referring to Machado (2006), "increasing the flexibility and applying digital alternatives rarely alters, in journalism, the centralized production model due to its application occurring in the same logic of vertical organization which characterizes journalism historically". Much more than the adoption of technological solutions, "truisms" crystallized in the area for decades should be discussed again, seeking to encounter the difficult balance between tradition and innovation.

| NOTES

- 1 First published in the book SOSTER, Demetrio; FIRMINO, Fernando. "Metamorfoses Jornalísticas II". Santa Cruz do Sul: Edunisc, 2009.
- 2 Details regarding Wikification and Recycling of Wikipedia articles can be found on the sites <http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikificar> and <http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reciclagem>
- 3 URL of the page *Trânsito, Mapas e Rotas* (Traffic, Maps and Routes): <http://g1.globo.com/Noticias/Transito/0..ANTO-7396.00.html>.
- 4 Available at http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Nada_de_pesquisa_in%C3%A9dita.
- 5 Further information on "original reporting" on Wikinews on page <http://>

en.wikinews.org/wiki/Wikinews:Original_reporting

- 6 The list of accredited “wiki-reporters” may be consulted at <http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/WN:CV>

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